

Sermon for Sunday, May 23, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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THE SPACE BETWEEN THE SPANK AND THE STONE  
Philippians 3:1-16

Text: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."  
Philippians 3:7

The other afternoon, several weeks ago, a couple from our congregation was driving down a highway. They were on a brief outing to buy some things and they were enjoying a certain excitement. They had just returned from Arizona and were busily making plans to move there. Suddenly a car approaching them around a curve at a too high speed went out of control. Before there was time to think or act, the car shot across the highway and smashed into Vern and Bea McCalley. When the screeching of tires, the shattering of glass, the grinding of metal was at last over, a sudden quiet descended upon the scene for a moment. Behind the bent and twisted steering wheel of his car, Vern McCalley was dead.

We took Vern back home just across the river in Illinois to bury him. The only thing close to the small cemetery was an open country crossroad. It was set back from the main road and we almost missed the brief opening in the trees along the roadside where the dirt road cut back into the farmland to the cemetery. Standing in the small cemetery, waiting for the funeral director to put the casket in place, I watched the grief-stricken faces of family and close friends as they stood awkwardly about, not knowing quite what to do, making small talk that didn't amount to anything because they didn't know what else to say. I looked across the slightly rolling rural fields, and in a nearby pasture the cows grazed quietly, unaware of the tragic scene unfolding before them. Over on the edge of the cemetery, in a tall tree, a mockingbird began to sing. Off in the distance I could hear the sound of a tractor working in the fields and at the crossroads, I could hear the occasional sound of a passing car. For those of us gathered there in the cemetery life had come to a halt for a moment. We were faced with death and the end of life. But out there in the pasture and in the field and on the highway, life went on as though nothing had happened. In a way it seemed so strange.

As I waited I began to walk about the little cemetery. Apparently it had been started around the 1850's, more than a hundred years ago. By now many of the stones were worn and almost illegible, some were tilted at crazy angles, some were broken, and some lay on the ground. One tall stone caught my attention and I stopped to read it. Over a hundred years old, it listed the names of three sons, all of whom had lived only a year or two. I wonder about their parents and the heartache they suffered to place their little babies here. Now, nobody really knew or cared. Nearby was a fairly new headstone and I stopped to read the poem written on it. It told of how the seventeen year old boy buried there was their oldest son, how much they loved him and how much fun they had together. Poetically it was very poor, but somehow it captured the agony and hurt they had felt and the love they had for their son. It ended this way, "He went off with his friends one day, He left on a motor bike. And since he died that way, We know what sorrow is like."

The funeral director caught my attention and signaled to me that he was ready. He began to gather the people around the grave and I started over. As I walked, my mind jumped ahead a hundred years. I wondered what the cemetery would look like then or if it would lie forgotten in the weeds. I wondered a hundred years from now what

Vern's headstone would look like. By then it might stand at some tilted angle--or broken--or the words worn away. And maybe a hundred years from now some other pastor would stop to gaze at it a moment and wonder who Vern was, what he was like, what happened to him and then walk on past.

But as I walked, an old hymn began to run through my mind and I began to hum it quietly to myself. It was the hymn, "Amazing Grace". Do you remember how it goes? "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see." The words of the last verse go like this: "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun." Suddenly the gloom of the moment lifted and my heart leaped with joy. All at once the pastoral scene around us was peaceful and lovely--somehow restful and reassuring, the mocking bird sounded so beautiful, the warm sun on my back felt so good. Then I knew that when all those stones had been ground away by the sun and the rain and the ravage of time, when this little cemetery lay forgotten and no one remembered anymore where it was, still Vern McCalley would be vibrantly alive in the presence of the Lord. Of all the efforts to mark the graves of loved ones, the only thing that would survive was the souls of those whose bodies had been placed here to return to the dust from which they came. By now I had arrived beside the casket and as I gazed at the sad faces looking at me, I knew what I wanted to say to them. I knew that since that day long ago when some hand had smartly spanked a little baby on the bottom and Vern had uttered his first cry until this moment when a stone would proclaim "Vern McCalley, Died May, 1976" there had been a space in between. I opened my book to the committal service. When, at last, I came to the end I read the closing words, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; yea, saith the Spirit, that henceforth they may rest from their labors and their works do follow them." Yes, between the spank and the stone there had been a space in between--and in that space for this man there had been Jesus. As we stood there then, that was all that really mattered.

I have a friend down in Texas whose brother-in-law was a Methodist minister. After he died of cancer they found among his papers a little poem he had written and I want to share it with you. It is entitled "Thoughts in a Cemetery" and it goes like this:

I wonder if my tombstone  
Standing on the green  
Will only give my birth and death  
And nothing in between?

So many million men have lived  
Who now no more are seen,  
Who've left a tale of birth and death,  
But nothing in between.

I care not for the span of life,  
Nor for the marble's sheen  
Just so they may, 'twixt birth and death,  
Carve something in between!

The question we are talking about this morning is the meaning of life. What does life mean for you this moment? When the time comes to carve your name in marble and to record the space between the spank and the stone, the time between birth and death, what would you like to see carved there? Would you like for them to carve something like this, "He accumulated a million dollars. May he rest in peace"? Would you like for your headstone to read, "He lived in the right section of town and

owned a Buick and a Cadillac"? Or how about this, "Excellent Bridge player, 6 handicapped golfer, avid Cardinal fan. Sleep in peace."? Or maybe this would appeal to you, "Dunn and Bradstreet thought well of him; First National Bank loved him. Amen."

Yes, what about the space in your life between the spank and the stone? What would you like to see carved in the space in between? You and I have many concerns this morning. We are concerned about belonging to the right crowd, giving the right appearance, doing the proper thing, projecting the right kind of image. But how concerned are we about our relationship to Jesus? You see, when the space between the spank and the stone is all used up, that's the only thing that will really matter.

In our scripture for this morning, St. Paul told us all about himself. He was a man with all of the proper credentials. He had the proper background, he had the right family, he did the right things, he acted in the socially acceptable way. As he put it, "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless." With that pedigree a Jew just couldn't be more kosher! Yet, St. Paul goes on to add, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." In St. Paul's life, in the space between the spank and the stone, that was the only thing that mattered, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

There are two things about St. Paul that especially stand out in my mind and I would like to share them with you. First, he was convinced about Jesus. He said, I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." Do you know Jesus that way this morning? Can you say from the depths of your heart, "I know whom I have believed"? Can you say with utter conviction that whatever you commit to the Lord will be reserved and kept for you against that great day when you stand before him to be judged? You see, if I don't believe that, I won't commit anything to him. I won't trust him. But if I am persuaded, as St. Paul says, if I am utterly convinced that the only thing I will really have at the end is what I have committed to him, then it is going to make a tremendous difference in what I entrust to him to keep for me.

What is Jesus keeping for you this morning? What have you committed to him? That is a sobering thought, is it not? You see, in the end what you keep for yourself you lose and it is what you give to Jesus that you will have. Do you know whom you have believed? Are you persuaded that he can keep for you what you commit to him against that judgment day?

The second thing that stands out in my mind about St. Paul is his confidence about life. He once said, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." I don't understand a car accident that snuffs out a life; I don't understand a bus wreck that kills 26 children; I don't understand a disease that destroys a loved one. But then, I don't need to understand. I don't need to understand because I know that God loves me--I only have to look at the cross with His Son on it to know that--and I know that out of the worst of tragedies, the most senseless of accidents, the most heartbreaking of troubles, I can count on God to bring good out of it. I know the master weaver has a plan in mind. I may not understand it now, but one day, when the pattern is complete, I, too, will be able to see how God was working for good. In the meantime, like St. Paul, we have the faith and confidence that all things do indeed work for good to them that love God.



Let me say one final word to us as a congregation. Today we are engaged in a great campaign to add new facilities to Central Church. There is already in the mail to you a brochure about the campaign. On the front it will say "Our Best For Christ. Striving for a better service, a bigger ministry." With all of the financial resources you and I have, would it not be a great tragedy--not so much for Central, but for us--would it not be a great tragedy for each of us if we failed to respond to that challenge? When we have the financial capability to raise many times that amount, would it not speak to the world, to the community--and to Jesus--about our commitment? If we failed, could we say with St. Paul, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ"?

Helen Heit was a brilliant foreign correspondent during World War II. As she was making her way out of France after its fall in 1940 she met a young French man whom she had known in other days. To her utter amazement she saw a radiance on the face of this friend that was in sharp contrast to the bitterness and gloom that was on the faces of his fellow countrymen. "What does it mean," she asked, "Why do you look so radiant?" "The world is being wrecked," he answered, "But God is giving me the privilege of helping to build it back." In so many ways our world today is being wrecked. God is giving this congregation the privilege of sharing in helping to build it back.

I care not for the span of life  
Nor for the marble's sheen,  
Just so they may, 'twixt birth and death  
Carve something in between.

In the space between the spank and the stone, St. Paul wrote, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Between the spank and the stone, what are you writing in your space?